

Violence Against Women

A balancing act: Agency and constraints in university students' understanding of and responses to sexual violence in the night-time economy

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keywords: sexual violence, gender-based violence, night-time economy,
postfeminism, agency

Abstract:

This paper extends our understanding of how university students make sense of, and respond to, sexual violence in the night-time economy (NTE). Based on semi-structured interviews with 26 students in a city in England, we examine students’ constructions of their experiences of sexual violence within the NTE, exploring their negotiations with, and resistance to, this violence. Building upon theories of postfeminism, we interrogate the possibilities for resistance within the gendered spaces of the NTE and propose a disaggregated conceptualisation of agency to understand responses to sexual violence, thereby offering useful insights for challenging sexual violence in the NTE and in universities.

There is a growing body of evidence documenting high prevalence levels of different forms of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) among student communities (Anitha and Lewis 2018). National Union of Students (NUS) (2010) research suggests that 1 in 7 women students have been victims of serious sexual assault or serious physical violence while at university or college in the UK. Based on women students' accounts of sexual violence in bars and nightclubs, Phipps and Young (2012) highlight how 'lad culture' within these spaces limits women's freedom and safety. 'Microaggressions in everyday life' (Sue 2010), such as non-consensual sexual attention and sexual harassment, are particularly common experiences for women and girls in various contexts (Girlguiding 2017; Vera-Gray 2016), including the night-time economy (NTE hereafter) (Kavanaugh 2013; Ronen 2010; Graham et al 2017).

While the gendered construction of women's intoxication, as well as the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in student communities has been the focus of a growing body of scholarship, there is much less exploration in the UK context of young people's experiences of gendered violence within the NTE (for exceptions, see Gunby et al. 2019; Nicholls 2018). This paper seeks to add to this emerging debate by exploring the contours of sexual violence in the NTE in order to understand how students construct and respond to such violence through analysis that locates their experiences within broader sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that shape their agency. In doing so, this paper offers insights about resistance to GBV.

Intoxication and gendered risk in the NTE

Literature on the expansion of the NTE in the UK over the last two decades (Winlow and Hall 2006) notes the increasing 'feminisation' of bars, nightclubs, and pubs (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), which were traditionally the primary domain of male pursuits of leisure drinking, and positioned as a marker of male privilege (Hey, 1986).

Changes in female drinking patterns are commonly interpreted as a ‘gender convergence’ and as an indicator of increasing or achieved gender equality (Bogren 2010; Jackson and Tinkler 2007; Measham and Østergaard 2009).

However, any ‘feminisation’ of the NTE has to be understood in the context of societal double standards on intoxication and gender (Holloway et al 2009). Analysis of news media coverage indicates that heavy drinking among men is more often excused or neutralized, whereas similar behavior by women is viewed as deviant in the UK (Day, 2010; Jackson and Tinkler 2007) and in other countries in Europe (Bogren 2010). The masculinisation of women’s drinking in these media debates through terms such as “ladettes” (Day et al., 2004) is underpinned by discourses that draw on biological understandings of sex difference to claim that women and girls ought not to ‘drink like men’ (Bogren, 2008). Research also indicates that gender stereotypes about drinking are reproduced rather than challenged in user-generated content medium such as YouTube (Rolando and Törrönen, 2015). The stigmatisation of female drinking is connected to its dominant interpretation as a sign of sexual willingness in a context where women are expected to be in control of their alcohol consumption and sexual behaviour, but also that of men (Törrönen & Juslin, 2011).

These double standards are evident in discourses on alcohol and intoxication in relation to rape and sexual assault in the NTE whereby women are ascribed blame and are responsabilised for their sexual assault if they are drunk, while men are exonerated for perpetrating sexual violence if intoxicated. This sexual double standard is evidenced in media representations (Gunby et al., 2013; Meyer, 2010), public perceptions (Starfelt et al., 2015), in mock jury debates (Finch and Munro, 2005) and in public safety campaigns which oblige women to regulate themselves to stay safe from men, rather than focusing on men’s aggressions (Brooks 2011; Campbell 2005). Indeed, there is a

large body of UK and international scholarship on intoxication and women's safety in the NTE which documents the gendered risk of navigating the NTE (Brooks 2011; Griffin et al. 2009, 2013; Tan 2013).

One manifestation of risk in the NTE that has been explored in North American and Australian contexts is everyday forms of GBV (Fileborn 2012; Graham et al. 2017; Kavanaugh 2013) such as non-consensual touching, verbal comments and non-verbal acts (e.g., gestures) that are sexual in nature and intent. In contrast to the scholarship on women's safety in the NTE in the UK which has centred on intoxication and risk such as fear of drink-spiking/rape (Brooks 2011; Sheard 2011), GBV in the form of unwanted sexual harassment remains 'practically unexamined' in the NTE in the UK context (Gunby et al. 2019, 1-2; also see Nicholls 2018). This paper aims to fill this gap by drawing upon interviews with 26 students in a small city in England to understand the scope and contours of GBV in NTE spaces and student responses to this problem.

Agency and postfeminism in the sexualised spaces of the NTE

NTE has also been conceptualized as 'liminal spaces' of uncertainties and pleasure for young women (Hayward and Hobbs 2007), which present opportunities for writing alternate sexual scripts that differ from the traditional emphasis on sexual restraint and passivity (Tan, 2013, Waite et al., 2011). However, feminists have drawn attention to the contradictory expectations that require (young) women to challenge traditional norms of femininity associated with timidity and passivity in favour of a hyper-sexual feminine subjectivity which appears empowering, but is ultimately constructed for the male gaze. This marks a shift from sexual objectification to subjectification (Gill and Scharff 2011), whereby women are expected to negotiate new feminine identities of sexual agency through bodily presentation and new alcohol consumption practices (Waite et al 2011). Whilst acknowledging the agency taking place and the development

of new modes of cultural representation that are being created in these spaces, sociologists have highlighted a convergence between traditional and new gender scripts (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009). The hallmark of this contemporary culture is the ‘option’ of ‘new’ forms of transgression which appear to offer young women license to reject long-established codes of heterosexual patriarchal social relations, while those codes and the sexual double standards they engender, remain in force.

Griffin et al (2013: 184) argue that the juxtaposition of postfeminism and the culture of intoxication in the NTE produces a challenging set of dilemmas for young women, who are exhorted to be sassy and independent, but not feminist; to be ‘up for it’ and to get drunk alongside young men, but not to ‘drink like men’. Women are also expected to look sexy and act with (hetero)sexual agency within a pornified NTE, but to distance themselves from the troubling figure of the ‘drunken slut’.

The contradictory gender expectations of the NTE can be understood as part of a broader trend towards ‘postfeminist’ understandings of society. Postfeminism is a contested idea and there is a great deal of slippage and confusion over the term. For example, there are disputes over whether the prefix ‘post’ should be read as *after feminism*, signaling its end, as *continuity with feminism*, or, finally, as simultaneously suggesting *both* rupture and continuity (Braithwaite 2002; Dean 2010; Gill 2007). In addition (and relatedly), there have been a range of debates around postfeminism, including how far postfeminism is a reinvented feminism for a modern era. Angela McRobbie (2009: 1), for example, has conceptualised postfeminism as a ‘new kind of anti-feminist sentiment’. In contrast, scholars such as Stephanie Genz (2006) have argued that it is not necessarily anti-feminist, emphasizing the ‘feminism’ in postfeminism and highlighting its promise.

In this article, we understand postfeminism to be a deeply ambivalent perspective in which, as Rosalind Gill (2007: 1) suggests, 'feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated'. The ambivalence arises because postfeminism takes aspects of feminism for granted, but simultaneously co-opts them into a 'much more individualistic discourse', employing impoverished understandings of the feminist vocabulary of 'choice' and 'empowerment' (McRobbie 2009: 1). Importantly, postfeminism also assumes that gender equality has already been (mostly) achieved and that feminism, understood as a revolutionary collective movement as opposed to an individual lifestyle choice, is therefore an anachronism (McRobbie 2009). This reflects neoliberal discourses constructing the individual as genderless, raceless, classless, and so on, shifting the focus away from social structures of power and towards simplistic notions of individual choice and freedom (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009; Connell 2011).

The individualisation and depoliticisation of gender in postfeminism positions young women as freely choosing subjects, as agents of their own destiny, rendering constraints/inequalities invisible. Gill (2008) expresses scepticism about the extent to which conformity to a narrow range of acceptable presentations of femininity which 'coincidentally' match the desires of heterosexual men are the result of genuine empowerment, and raises questions about the internalisation of conventional beauty norms. Without denying women's agency, it is important to challenge the logic of postfeminism which acts as a 'thought-stopper', closing off questions and marginalising issues of power before they can be asked (AUTHOR 2016). Our analysis of the interviews explores how these negotiations are reflected on in young people's understandings of sexual violence in the NTE, and their responses to such violations.

A key theme in discussions of sexual violence in the NTE is the question of agency. Given both opportunities for pleasure and empowerment, and the limitations to these ‘freedoms,’ examining young people’s accounts enables us to explore the complexities of agency in this context. We employ Katz’s (2004) conceptually disaggregated notion of agency as acts of *resilience*, *reworking* and *resistance*, which recognises the constraints posed by oppressive contexts and ideologies in shaping both understandings of experiences and possible responses to these. Acts of *resilience* build on a limited consciousness of the relations of oppression, while acts of *reworking* and especially those of *resistance*, draw on and (re)produce a much more critical and oppositional consciousness of the hegemonic powers at work (Katz 2004, 239–259). While the former may offer spaces of recuperation for the individual while leaving the oppressive structures untouched, reworking and resistance seek to recalibrate or challenge them with varying degrees of effectiveness.

Methods and Data

This article draws on 26 semi-structured interviews with university undergraduate students (seven men and 19 women) aged 18-25. None of the interviewees identified as neither male nor female, or a gender identity different to that assigned at birth. All but two respondents identified as heterosexual, one woman stating that she was ‘equally attracted to females and males’ and the other was ‘mostly attracted to females’. Eighteen participants identified as ‘White British’, two as ‘Asian/Asian British’, three as ‘Black/African/Caribbean/Black British’, two as ‘Mixed/Multiple Ethnic groups’, and one as ‘Other’.

Both men and women were recruited as previous research in the UK context has often been based entirely on interviews with women (for example, NUS 2010). Whilst this is a valid approach as women are most likely to be victims of GBV, interviewing male

1 students allowed us to gain insight into men's understandings of, and responses to,
2
3 GBV, which is an important part of understanding the complexities of gendered
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5 identities and scripts which can either perpetuate or facilitate GBV-tolerant cultures.
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7 Although this article draws largely on women's experiences (because they were most
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9 likely to talk about their own encounters with sexual violence in the NTE), we analyse
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11 insights from two men who reflected on barriers to and possibilities of recognising and
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13 challenging harm in the NTE. Other outputs from the project will focus on the role of
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15 masculinity in lad culture, foregrounding men's perspectives.
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18 Interviews were conducted by five members of the research team, lasted between one
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20 and two hours, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The university where the
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22 research was conducted is located in a small city in England, UK (university population:
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24 10000 undergraduates), and is not named to protect identities. Another relevant
25
26 contextual factor is that the data was collected against the backdrop of an action
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28 research project in 2014-15 which established one of the first 'bystander intervention'
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30 (BI) programmes to challenge gender-based violence in a UK university². The purpose
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32 of this article (and of the interviews) is not to evaluate the BI programme's impact as
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34 the programme was too short-lived for firm conclusions to be drawn about its influence.
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36 We interviewed both participants and non-participants to gain a broader insight into
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38 students' perceptions of GBV (which might not have been gained from interviewing
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40 programme participants alone). Given the lack of an overall pattern of difference
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42 between the two groups, we do not present the data analysis as a direct comparison
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44 between participants and non-participants. However, we note some insights from the
45
46 research which are of value to those designing prevention education programmes.
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49 The research team constructed seven vignettes on various manifestations of GBV to
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51 gain insight into how students construct GBV and the possible responses to it through
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discussion of the hypothetical scenarios. When used in qualitative research, vignettes ‘enable participants to define the situation in their own terms’ and ‘provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics’ (Barter and Renold 1999). The scenarios were based on a combination of insights taken from previous research findings and media reports about GBV in UK universities and piloted with students (who did not take part in the interviews) to ensure that the narratives were clear and ‘rang true’ for them. In the interviews, students read each vignette, discussing each one in turn. Interviewees frequently and spontaneously raised their own experiences in the process of talking about the vignettes, suggesting that this approach was helpful in facilitating a space for such conversations. Analysing interviewees’ constructions of fictional scenarios is useful in its own right and a common feature of studies employing vignettes. However, here we focus on examining the interviewees’ accounts of their own encounters in response to one particular vignette³ to explore the complexities inherent in university students’ perceptions about one manifestation of GBV—the continuum of sexual violence in the NTE—and of resistance to it.

Based on a constructivist theoretical framework, we utilised the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10 to identify patterns and enable the organisation and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006). We identified significant concepts within each transcript through a process of continuous coding (e.g., accounts of sexual harassment), following which the concepts were compared across different transcripts to reveal emerging common and divergent themes (e.g., different constructions of sexual harassment experiences). At this stage, a process of constant comparative analysis between and within transcripts enabled the development and refinement of the themes. The aim was to go beyond the semantic content of the data, and to examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations as well as the

broader sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that we theorize as shaping the semantic content of the data (see Braun and Clarke 2006, 84).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were made aware of the potentially distressing nature of the interview themes, and information about appropriate services was provided. In recognition of hierarchies between academic staff and students, student participants were reassured that (non)participation would not affect any academic outcomes, and members of the research team only interviewed students that they were not currently teaching. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants.

There are some limitations of the data and of the study. A convenience sample (n=26) was recruited through advertisements on campus. The aim was not to be numerically representative, but to achieve sample adequacy through the inclusion of diverse participants who may experience GBV on campus in different ways as a result of their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. To some extent, the final sample achieved reflects this diversity – for example, it is relatively varied in terms of ethnicity compared to the student intake at this university. As noted above, we also recruited male interviewees, who are less likely to be included in studies of GBV on campus. Most research participants were, however, women (19 out of 26). While special efforts were made to recruit men (e.g. through signposting in the recruitment advertisement), there may have been perceptions of the topic as women-oriented. In addition, women are more likely to experience GBV and may have been more attracted to the study for this reason. Finally, while two (female) students who identified as non-heterosexual were interviewed, it would have been beneficial to recruit non-heterosexual men and transgender or non-binary students as both groups may experience particular manifestations of GBV in the form of homophobic/transphobic abuse.

As a nonprobability sample was employed and the study is based on students at one university, the generalizability of the interviews to the population is somewhat limited. However, generalization in *statistical* terms is usually not a central concern in qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell 2016: 96) where the emphasis is on ‘information-rich’ cases (Patton 2015) and on gaining a comprehensive, ‘subjective understanding of *how* and *why* people perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret, and interact’ (Adler and Adler 2012: 8). The nuanced and in-depth analysis presented here offers this kind of valuable insight into students’ perspectives in the under-researched UK context. Moreover, it has been argued that generalizability should not be understood as solely a property of quantitative research based on probabilistic sampling (Gobo 2008). Further qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to fully establish whether these patterns are empirically present in other UK universities. However, this research expands knowledge of how students make sense of, and respond to, GBV in the NTE and in doing so contributes to broader conceptual understandings of agency and gendered structures in these contexts. Key findings about barriers to resistance which need to be challenged and the importance of employing a nuanced, disaggregated understanding of agency to examining possibilities for resistance, are applicable to other contexts.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are presented alongside a discussion of students’ experiences and perceptions. These themes include student accounts of how they experience the NTE as a gendered and heterosexist space, as well as their experiences of sexual harassment in these spaces and of the responses from staff in NTE venues. The final theme explores a range of student responses to sexual violence in the NTE and analyses the effectiveness of their actions in challenging the gendered norms and cultures that underpin such violence.

The gendered spaces of the NTE: Constructing women as subjects of consumption

Students' accounts indicated that the NTE is overwhelmingly constructed around the presumption of a heterosexual male consumer. As one interviewee noted:

You know how they promote these club things ... and it's like 'oh, free drinks for you' – they target certain people. Like the women they put on leaflets most of the time – because I've walked past them; they've never offered [it to] me. The way they're dressed, kind of airbrushed celebrity, small figure and probably half-dressed or totally naked to be honest. (Letitia, Black British woman)

Letitia was aware of how, under this heterosexual male gaze, she fell short of the standards of physical appearance deemed desirable in certain nightclubs, and outlined bouncers' roles in policing the bodies that belong within these spaces. She surmised that she did not belong because she was seen as a 'geek' who 'belongs in the library'. The women depicted on the leaflets—at least in the context of nightclubs in this city—are also almost exclusively white, so racialised constructions of desirable femininity may also have played a role in her exclusion. These flyers were also the subject of criticism by another female interviewee who identified as 'equally attracted to both males and females', reported working with the 'LGBT' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) society at her college to prevent nightclubs from circulating flyers using fetishised images of lesbian women.

Eva described her experiences at a singles theme night, the 'kinky disco.' The nightclub had two levels, with the upper balcony reserved for men and decorated with pictures of scantily dressed women in sexually suggestive poses. The space enabled men to look down at women positioned on the lower balcony:

They have 'kinky disco', which in itself says a lot [...] they had girls' [pictures] sort of up on the walls with like really, really like short and revealing clothing and stuff. It

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3 *was just women, it was very straight. It sort of felt like you were being looked at more*
4 *because people were sort of expecting everyone to dress in a certain way. [...] I think*
5 *because people would, like, look up the sort of the pictures and the actual girls that are*
6 *up there. So they'll look around and you're sort of there looking at yourself and your*
7 *friends and then there's other people looking at you. (Eva, White British woman)*

14 While Eva pointed out the heterosexist representations in the imagery on the walls (“it
15 was very straight”), other respondents talked about their discomfort with
16 representations of ‘girl-on-girl stuff’ (Zoe, white woman) to promote events as
17 sexy/glamorous. As representations of gender are intertwined with constructions of
18 sexuality, non-heterosexual people may experience ‘lad culture’ differently (Phipps and
19 Young, 2013) given the pervasive heteronormativity within such spaces. The
20 promotional literature and gatekeeping policies of these nightclubs construct women as
21 objects to be consumed and rely on fantasies of lesbians as seen through a heterosexual
22 male gaze (Gill 2009). This heterosexist, classed and racialised construction of the
23 ideal relationship/body is not only problematic in contributing to the
24 objectification/subjectification of all women, but particularly excludes those who are
25 older, non-white, disabled or not heterosexual (Gill 2009; McRobbie 2009).

42 Eva’s quote above also illustrates how women are expected to act as sexual
43 *subjects/agents*, rather than being passively objectified: ‘you’re sort of there looking at
44 yourself.’ Letitia’s account indicates how bodily presentation assumes primacy in these
45 gendered spaces as women’s inappropriate (not appropriately sexualised), or
46 unfeminine, presentation limits their access to nightclubs (Chatterton and Hollands
47 2003), whereas men’s bodily presentation is differently policed, e.g., to prevent men
48 attired in ripped jeans or sportswear from entering. Eva and Letitia seem to suggest that
49 they are not as free to choose their bodily presentation as postfeminist narratives imply.

Gill (2008) argues that the increasingly frequent ‘erotic’ presentation of girls’ and women’s bodies in public spaces means that women are no longer seen as traditional passive objects of the patriarchal gaze. Instead, they are presented as desiring sexual subjects who actively choose to undertake the requisite forms of beauty protocol, ‘freely’ self-position their female body as sexually available to men at all times (Ticknell et al 2003), and expect—indeed welcome—the male gaze. In this notion of choice as productive of subjectivity, women’s ongoing work to achieve these gendered standards are framed within a neoliberal ‘pleasing themselves’ discourse (Gill 2008), whereby women are doing it for themselves.

But pleasing themselves in this manner also comes at a cost; our research participants were all too aware that these choices are fraught with contradictions and impossibilities:

Because my friends they drink and they're like a bit wild. So they get a lot of attention when we go out. So they're used to people coming up to them [...] touching, and stuff like that, then they have to like turn around, like, don't do that. (Janice, Black British woman)

Janice seems to be reiterating the much-documented connection that is documented in scholarship between intoxication and gendered risk (Brooks, 2011; Sheard, 2011).

Victim-blaming is inherent in Janice’s suggestion of a causal connection between her friends’ mode of bodily presentation/alcohol consumption and the unwanted sexual attention that they routinely experience (‘so they get a lot of attention’), which they then have to find ways to deter. The omnipresent threat of sexual violence requires women to engage in multiple ‘safe-keeping’ acts such as not dressing in certain ways, avoiding certain public locales. Literature on risk and intoxication in the NTE indicates that women who do not conform to this ‘performative condition of

normative femininity’ (Campbell, 2005: 119) may be blamed if they are deemed to have made themselves ‘vulnerable’ to sexual assault through failing to adhere to appropriate feminine behaviour (Nicholls 2017)—in this case by being ‘a bit wild’.

In a small city dominated by the presence of the university, many students also inhabit the NTE as workers and encounter similar imperatives. As one student recounted:

I had a friend [...] that worked there and she had to go, like, dressed in like hot pants. I was like, but why. But the men that work there they were dressed in trousers. [...] Because what she was wearing she was getting her arse pinched by a lot by the people that were there. (Molly, White British woman)

Molly’s account notes that dress codes for male bar staff were not sexualised, which demonstrates how the sexualisation of the NTE reflects the imagined desires of the heterosexual male customer. Such constructions of women’s sexuality as part of the consumer’s service experience require women workers to not only conform to sexualised dress and appearance codes, but also to perform feminine receptivity towards male customers’ sexual advances. Women service workers’ exposure to customer sexual violence in bars/hotels is exacerbated by management techniques seeking to maximise profits, such as encouraging the sale of alcohol (Good and Cooper 2016; Wolkowitz 2006:108–10).

Further sections will explore students’ accounts about and responses to sexual violence within the spaces of the NTE.

Student experiences of sexual harassment in the NTE: ‘This is what just happens’

This section outlines students’ experiences of sexual harassment and explores how students interpret and account for these experiences. Interviewees described how men would routinely run their hands over women’s back, grab their bottom, and persistently invade their private space. Sexual harassment in the NTE was constructed as part of the

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3 fabric of young women's everyday social lives: 'it is something that a lot of women do
4 put up with', 'I expect it to happen' and 'I'm not shocked' were some of the phrases
5
6 participants used and suggests that such violations were the norm.
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10 *I do know it happens a lot because when you're in a club and you're walking through*
11 *the dance floor, guys will pat your bum on the way past [...] It's kind of accepted. I*
12 *think it's accepted in the sense [that] because if you said no and they carried on doing*
13 *it, it becomes even worse because it's sort of like they've been told to back off. (Lucy,*
14 *White British woman)*
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21 Lucy suggests drawing attention to harassment would only serve to highlight the lack
22 of consent, which would make women's lack of power apparent. Best, then, to ignore
23 it. The language Lucy uses to describe the non-consensual touching is also downplays
24 the act – a 'pat' can be affectionate, unlike other possible descriptions such as 'grope'
25 or 'grab,' which imply aggression. In their narratives, students accounted for this
26 violence in various ways:
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35 *A: Once you're in a club, I think people think rules are different, definitely.*

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37 *Q: Different, how?*

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39 *A: Men, they like to wander up and grab you on the backside. I've actually had been*
40 *pinched at a bar and someone's put their hands around me and grabbed my breasts*
41 *from behind before, lots in my experience. It seems that people do think that if you're*
42 *inside a club, the rules are different. Most of them wouldn't do that on the street. (Alice,*
43 *White British woman)*
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51 Alice suggests that nightclubs are spaces where the rules are different from the outside
52 world. Interviewees' construction of the NTE as emotionally charged spaces where
53 sexual aggression is normalised or accepted reiterates observations in scholarship that
54 part of the attraction of these spaces is the opportunities for transgression of social
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norms that are taken for granted during day-time (Hubbard 2005; Williams 2008). This language of exceptionalism ignores the many ways in which these so-called 'transgressions' replicate the violence women encounter elsewhere, such as on public transport and the streets, during 'normal' times (Girlguiding 2017; Vera-Gray 2016). As a counterpoint to exceptionalism, the concept of the continuum of violence (Kelly 1988) highlights the common character underlying sexual violence across different spaces, and between different forms of violence, such as rape to more commonplace forms of harassment. This enables us to recognise parallel behaviours within the NTE and other spaces, whilst paying attention to specific constructions of such behaviours in the NTE, which we argue serve to hinder efforts to challenge them.

Though interviewees tended to construct sexual harassment as something to be expected; they nevertheless articulated the impact it had on them. One common theme emerging from the interviews was a sense of violation:

J: It is accepted because nobody says anything about it, nobody really makes it a big-enough deal.

Q: What do you think would happen if they did make a big deal?

J: I don't know, but these kind of things, they seem harmless in a way. I don't agree with it. I think you should be able to say [...] people shouldn't have to have people slapping their bums and making them feel uncomfortable. But at the same time, it's like, oh, he only touched a bum or he only put his arms around you, so what's the big deal [...] Because you just think, oh, well, did I really get harmed? (Janice, Black British woman)

Janice simultaneously normalises and minimises sexual harassment, using words like 'only', not a 'big deal' and 'did I really get harmed', but also condemns it by signalling her disagreement with these very narratives.

Other interviewees were more unequivocal in their condemnation:

(I felt) disgusted, angry and awful. [...] It was horrible, I felt uncomfortable, I didn't want to be there anymore. [...] (Alice, White British woman)

Some interviewees interpreted sexual harassment through essentialist understandings of gender and sex which accounted for men's actions and framed women's responses:

It's not that I think that should be acceptable in society. It's basically lazy to say we don't want to deal with it, so you should just let it happen. But it shouldn't really be like that—I don't know, my flatmates think it's fine [for that to happen] when they go out. (Molly, White British woman)

Molly seems to be articulating both the everyday-ness of this violence which renders resisting futile, as well as the need to take a stance and reject it. Scholarship on violence against women has questioned this paradox asking why does 'normal' behaviours of men and boys feel like harmful violations to many women and girls (Kelly 1988)? This paradox also frames the issue of what the appropriate response to such violences may be, as Rebecca noted:

The boys have this thing that, oh you should be grateful for all the attention. But you see that often the girls don't want to be rude or whatever, but it's obvious that they don't want the attention... I think a big group of boys, it's like this unspoken rule that we're going to be this big manly group of men and we're going to like go off and do what men do. We're going to pull lots of women, yeah. [...] I'd say it happens at least once every night, at least once. You just get fed up [...] I end up being rude because I just don't want that sort of attention. (Rebecca, White British woman)

Several participants' invoked biologically determinist narratives about men's innate drive for sex, their need to 'pull' as part of their 'natural' impulse to initiate sexual contact, and women's corresponding role as sexual gatekeepers. Again, the discursive

1 strategies deployed here simultaneously condemn and re-inscribe gendered sexual
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3 scripts. These narratives suggest that simply appearing attractive—in a context where
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5 women's entry into nightclubs is premised upon a 'freely' chosen hyper-sexual mode
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7 of bodily presentation—encourages male sexual aggression because men's sexual
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9 appetites cannot be controlled. At the same time, traditional, as well as postfeminist,
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11 constructions of femininity commonly require women to take responsibility for
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13 managing male desire. Women are blamed if they are seen to have made themselves
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15 'vulnerable' through ineffective gatekeeping of sexual advances (Nicholls 2017) which
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17 'let it happen', or labelled as 'rude' if their gatekeeping efforts are seen as too assertive.
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19 Our respondents utilised culturally available discourses relating to heteronormative
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21 sexual scripts to make sense of everyday harassment, violence, coercion and sexism in
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23 the context of the NTE. Their accounts highlight how dominant discourses of
24
25 compulsory heterosexuality and gendered norms about sexual subjectivities shape
26
27 young people's understandings of such violence as natural and inevitable. However, as
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29 documented in other research (Brooks 2011; Graham et al 2017; Tinkler et al 2016),
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31 such violence is simultaneously condemned as an unacceptable violation.
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42 **Invisible in plain sight: Gendered discourses about sexual violence and the** 43 44 **(in)credible words of women**

46 Whilst recognising the harm caused by everyday forms of sexual violence, interviewees
47
48 also reflected on the difficulties of challenging such behaviours:
49

51 *The nightclub one, it is hard. There'll be fights, abuse hurled at you just because you're*
52
53 *trying to challenge it. You wouldn't, because you want to avoid the trouble. It's horrible*
54
55 *to think that because you can't like challenge it and change this social norm. And some*
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57 *[men] might be like [to other lads who subject a woman to unwanted attention], 'Oh*
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3 *lad, at least you tried'. You know what I mean? Or some might find it funny, it's a*
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5 *laugh, its banter that he got rejected. (Ryan, White British man)*
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8 Despite widespread sexual harassment in the NTE, several interviewees reported that
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10 such invisibilisation and minimization of sexual violence was enacted not just by
11
12 perpetrators and bystanders—particularly men—but also by bar staff and bouncers.
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14 *L: Things like that still happen in front of security's eyes, but they just stand there doing*
15
16 *nothing. If I've seen it and if I say something to them—they just turn around and laugh*
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18 *in my face. So it's like you just end up just keeping quiet and not really saying much.*
19
20 *[...] It's only when they [boys] maybe cause a fight [...] that's when they just come in,*
21
22 *get you out, chuck them out. [...] I don't really know why they don't say anything.*
23
24 *Maybe they think that their job is like, I'm only here to protect people from getting*
25
26 *harmed and nothing else.*
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30 *Q: So you don't think they see that as harm?*
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33 *L: I think [when] it's more physical, that's when they act upon it. Well, he hasn't fought*
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35 *with nobody. He hasn't punched nobody. So oh well, nothing we can do about it, just*
36
37 *let him in. (Letitia, Black British woman)*
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40 Letitia suggests bouncers routinely invalidate women's experiences of sexual violence.
41
42 Letitia does not mention just one incident, but describes a pattern of aggressions and
43
44 any help-seeking by women being ignored by bouncers who police physical conflicts
45
46 between men (seen as harmful), whilst perceiving men's harassment of women as
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48 unproblematic (Tinkler et al 2016). This invisibilisation of men's sexual harassment of
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50 women as a private, trivial matter between two people has been documented in
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52 scholarship (Kelly and Radford 1990), and was what motivated one student to volunteer
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54 for the BI programme:
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3 *They [bouncers] don't bother. They're not interested in that, not particularly, until [...]*
4 *they're scrapping or whatever. [...] If there's trouble for the club, then they're*
5 *interested. But if there is just trouble for one person that's moaning, that is whatever.*
6 *We're not interested. That's what sparked me because I'm hearing from my friends who*
7 *are girls like, god, there's so many annoying lads knocking about who won't leave you*
8 *alone in clubs. And I'm like, why is that the case. So that's what really drew me to it*
9 *[the Stand Together programme]. (Ryan, White British man)*

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19 In the face of disinterest from bar staff and bouncers who categorise women's
20 complaints as an overreaction, one woman took matters into her own hands:

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23 *I was once chucked off of a club because I basically stood up for something that I*
24 *thought, no, I'm not going to take this. And then I was thrown out of it. I was told to*
25 *go out. And I tried to explain it to them. I'm like, you don't get it. It's this guy that*
26 *came up to me and started saying all these things and I basically told him, no, stop it.*
27 *And then they're like, well, you were kind of arguing too much. And I was like, no, I*
28 *wasn't arguing. And they were like, just go away. [...] He was so close to me and I*
29 *was like, please can you just leave. And he wouldn't leave. But they looked at it yeah,*
30 *basically, like I was the one causing trouble. (Letitia, Black British woman)*

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42 Letitia's public challenge to sexual aggression was constructed as the problem, rather
43 than the initial sexual violence, which was perceived as a private matter.

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Some students felt that student union run venues were more cognisant of potential sexual harassment and took measures to create safer drinking cultures, including having supportive bar staff. This highlights the importance for prevention education programmes of engaging with nightclubs in local communities – an uphill task where any such efforts may constitute a challenge to their business model.

Diverse student responses to sexual violence: Building resilience, reworking and resistance

The ephemeral nature of most micro-aggressions (a fleeting touch, an unseen hand grabbing a bottom) combined with the prevailing culture of NTEs, makes resistance difficult. In this cultural and institutional context, women were often forced to devise a range of strategies to inhabit these spaces of fun and pleasure while staying safe.

Katz's conceptually disaggregated notion of agency is useful to understand students' responses to sexual violence in the NTE in a way which avoids the binary characterisation of people as *either* passive victims *or* successful agents. Katz seeks to break away from a tradition that reads resistance in every autonomous act by distinguishing between social practices 'whose primary effect is autonomous initiative, recuperation, or *resilience*; those acts that attempt to *rework* oppressive and unequal circumstances and those that are intended to *resist*, subvert, or disrupt conditions of exploitation and oppression' (Katz 2004, 242). This approach allows us to unpack the multiple forms, intentions, and effects of agency.

Strategies of resilience

Feeling unable to openly challenge persistent, unwelcome attention, some young women felt that avoidance—ignoring initial sexual advances and aggressions, moving out of reach, leaving the area, or avoiding the perpetrator by talking to others—was the safest, most effective response. Rebecca recounted one such avoidance refusal strategy: *Me and my friend, we had two boys talking to us, and we felt that we couldn't leave really. So I went to the toilet and then like waited until she joined me. You shouldn't have to do that. You should just be like [...] 'It's just like girly night-out, can we leave you to it.'* *You can't be yourself with your friends and stuff because they are hanging*

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3 around. [...] So you have to really change what you're doing to get yourself out of the
4 situation which shouldn't be the case. (Rebecca, White British woman).

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8 Hlavka (2014: 344-46) documents how women respond to aggressive sexual conduct
9 whilst operating within a heteronormative discourse of gendered expectations of male
10 sexual aggression. Women are required to self-protect, to avoid potentially dangerous
11 situations by 'ignoring' behaviour or manoeuvring to evade attention without
12 provoking retaliation, as documented elsewhere in scholarship on intoxication and
13 sexual violence in the NTE (Ronen 2010; Brooks 2011; Graham et al 2017). In Katz's
14 (2004) formulation of agency, such behaviour would be characterised as creative
15 strategies—or even merely ephemeral tactics (Certeau 1984)—through which women
16 can gain a sense of control over their personal space, though in ways that do little to
17 challenge particular behaviour as problematic or disrupt the gendered hierarchies and
18 constructions of femininities/masculinities within these spaces.

32 33 ***Strategies of reworking***

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35 Several students crafted rehearsed strategies that helped them to more directly deflect
36 men's unwanted sexual attentions. A common practice relied on the presence of a male
37 friend, or the invocation of an imaginary boyfriend:

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42 *Most of my girlfriends, it happens to them. It happens an awful lot and obviously you*
43 *have to be like, Oh, got a boyfriend, and until you say that, until there is another man*
44 *involved essentially, that's when they are like, Okay, we'll back off. But if you're just*
45 *saying, get lost, go away, they will continue with it. And I don't know why that*
46 *boundary just doesn't seem to be there. (Elizabeth, White British woman)*

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54 Even more effective than women's assertion of their (pretend) relationship status, were
55 pre-agreed strategies entailing intervention from male friends:

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3 *Sometimes if this happens, I'd just peek from the queue. They [male friends] pick up*
4 *on it. That you can kind of give them the eye. And like me and my friend have been in*
5 *situations where [...] they'll like come over and like pretend, Oh, I've been looking for*
6 *you, where have you been. And then the other lads will like back off because it's kind*
7 *of like, Okay, so they've got, I don't know, like their own males. So it's kind of, like,*
8 *they're not for us to play with anymore [...] they're not free girls anymore because*
9 *they've got males looking after them. So they step back. (Lucy, White British woman)*

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Lucy utilised men's proprietary behavior towards 'their' women to avoid harassment by pretending that she is 'not free' for them 'to play with anymore'. Whilst some men participated in these efforts to keep their women friends safe, they also perceived limitations to this approach. One theatre student recounted how applying his BI training through this strategy. He was not the only one to recount his frustration at being called upon to be a 'boyfriend' because men would only cede their entitlement to another man:
I might pretend to be her boyfriend or have more stern words with the person. That shouldn't be a reason for them not to touch them just because they have boyfriends. They shouldn't do it anyway. But on a night out, with these idiots, that seems to be the only thing they understand [...] Any means to stop it from happening you can take, but any means to stop it from turning into a fight [...] if you say that's my girlfriend nine times out of ten they'll apologize and go away. (Ethan, White British man)

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This strategy supports Stanko's (1985) observation on how women's fear of crime and violence leads them to seek protection from familiar men against assumed and real aggressions of other men. However, women's strategies may sometimes incur further risk of harassment from these familiar men as their strategic overtures can then become the pretext for unwanted sexual advances from their 'protectors'.

One woman recounted pretending that she was a lesbian to deflect persistent unwelcome attention:

There was a guy that came to us and wouldn't leave us alone even after I'd said I was with someone, I wasn't interested. And he was also oh, well and then carried on. And then we went oh, we are lesbians he was like, Oh, right, okay. And then just wandered off. It seemed to be the easiest way. (Leila, White British woman)

This strategy—while effective here—might again risk drawing sexual harassment from men who bring the hetero male gaze to lesbians, or, indeed, risk homophobic abuse. However, Nicholls (2017) argues that threats of sexual violence and harassment in these spaces are primarily associated with women's positioning as subordinated gendered subjects, rather than with the policing of 'non-normative' sexualities. She suggests that young women are more concerned by managing the risks associated with a heterosexualised male gaze rather than by a homophobic gaze, and adopting markers of normative, heterosexual femininity—whilst expected within the spaces of the NTE—was also felt to increase the risks of receiving this kind of 'unwanted attention' and hence needed to be carefully managed (Nicholls 2017).

Katz (2004, 247-251) argues that such reworking strategies may be a product of a lack of consciousness of relations of oppression. However, almost all respondents who reported these tactics also noted their frustration at the limited efficacy of more direct efforts to challenge unwanted sexual attention/ aggression and the risks associated with a direct refusal. It can be argued that rather than a lack of consciousness, their reworking strategies may be shaped as much by the cultural context of the NTE as they are by broader gendered sexual scripts within which women are forced to manage the risk of sexual aggression, whilst choosing the most effective and safe refusal strategy to avoid escalation. While men's persistent unwanted attention is naturalised as 'what men do',

women's negotiation of consent can prove to be a delicate balancing act: too forceful a rejection of men's sexual aggressions would risk positioning these women as not only unreasonable and a 'bad sport' (Sue 2010), but rude and thereby unfeminine, and may expose them to further risks. One interviewee recalled how a female friend who rejected a man's unwanted advances in a forthright manner was punched by him.

Reworking strategies may deter sexual violence in the immediate term. However, it can be argued that such refusal tactics serve to reinscribe the gendered norms that underpin the behaviours and attitudes that they seek to evade. These reworking strategies take the woman out of the ambit of risk by positioning her as 'already taken', but in the process construct other, 'free', women as legitimate objects of male sexual aggression/attention.

Practices of resistance and overt challenges

Students described various practices entailing direct challenges in the face of sexual violence. A few women recounted attending nightclubs in groups to derive protection from each other's presence, as documented elsewhere (Ronen 2010; Graham et al 2017; Griffin et al 2009). One programme-volunteer described initiatives that she took to 'look out for' other female friends—particularly to prevent predatory men 'taking advantage' of women who were too drunk to give consent— and how this had led to her being labelled a 'cockblocker'. This pejorative phrase positioned her as a 'spoilsport' ('blocker') for preventing men ('cocks'), constructed as 'natural' sexual aggressors, from achieving their goal. A few women reported calling out such behavior and challenging it directly where they encountered it:

Especially the queues, the queues are like really annoying. [...] I've been in a situation where I was in a queue and these things happen almost all the time. You are in a queue, you have a male behind you and then you know, it's like a crampy queue so you can't

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3 *really stand with enough space and then he tries to push himself on you. [...] at first I*
4 *kept quiet and then it comes, I was like, you have to stop it. I'm telling you now, you*
5 *have to stop because if you do it again you won't like what will happen. [...] And then*
6 *he left the line. (Grace, Black British woman)*
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12 However, overt challenges were seen as risky and as likely to be rebuffed by the
13 assertion that men's 'normal' behavior or 'routine' sexual advances had been
14 misinterpreted by the women.
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19 *When you go to nightclubs and it's a crowded place and people are passing by, it's very*
20 *common for guys who are passing by to—they just put their hands and feel the girls'*
21 *backs. That happens a lot. Like it could be seen as innocent, but I kind of think it's*
22 *probably not. I don't like it. [...] he probably just wanted to get past, probably*
23 *shouldn't have challenged him. But then again, you don't know if they are trying to –*
24 *if they've bad intentions or whatever. I have shouted at a boy before because he like –*
25 *he stood behind me and [...] I didn't like [the way] he was touching me. And he's like,*
26 *I am not doing anything, and he carried on doing it. And then I did shout at him. And*
27 *he was like, I didn't realize. And that sense of entitlement that they think you should be*
28 *okay with that, if they do what they like. (Rebecca, White British woman)*
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42 Rebecca recognises and condemns his sense of entitlement which characterized her
43 rejection as simultaneously a misunderstanding and an overreaction. Within a
44 differentiated conception of agency, Katz (2004) characterises such utterances and
45 actions that directly challenge oppressive social relations and contexts as resistance.
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47 Such a contextualised approach to agency seeks to move beyond the romantic
48 assumptions that equate agency with autonomous action; a conceptualisation that pre-
49 empts empirical research which takes into account socio-economic forces, racial and
50 sexual subjectification, institutional hierarchies, or even just the contingencies of
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everyday life. Katz characterises *resistance* as action or utterances that involve oppositional consciousness and seek to achieve emancipatory change. She contrasts resistance from forms of *reworking* that alter the organization, but not the polarization of power relations, and from *resilience*, practices that enable people to survive without really changing the circumstances that make such survival so hard.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that the most significant barriers hindering resistance to sexual violence in the NTE include: normalisation of sexual assault/harassment; problematic responses from men and NTE staff (bouncers) to attempts at resistance; and postfeminist constructions of GBV as an individualised problem, rather than a product of gendered power structures. Taken together, these constraints mean that despite recognition of problematic aspects of the NTE, young people may normalise and individualise sexual violence in these spaces, leading them to perform acts of resilience and to individual navigation and reworking of the culture of the NTE in order to emerge (relatively) unscathed, rather than to outright resistance. This is perhaps unsurprising given the strength of postfeminist discourses, as neoliberal conceptions of gendered selves and of GBV militate against collective mobilization. On the other hand, there was some evidence of reworking and resistance amongst interviewees who connected their specific experiences of sexual violence to broader gendered power relations and therefore perceived the need for more conscious and potentially collective acts to challenge, rather than simply survive, the NTE. Attempts to shift the violence-tolerant culture of the NTE need to engage with all of these barriers, and to highlight the importance of collective action in order to tackle the problem.

In the postfeminist neoliberal context which de-politicises/de-genders GBV, our findings reiterate criticisms of some US BI initiatives which overemphasise

individualised solutions to GBV and employ problematic, de-gendered concepts of ‘power-based violence’ (Coker et al 2011; Katz et al 2011:689). The findings in our study demonstrate the need to engage with and challenge postfeminist equalisation discourses within which sexist and heteronormative attitudes and behaviours are re-packaged as individual, freely chosen modes of acting and being. Within these discourses, GBV is characterised as a private matter for the victim, rather than an ongoing issue that reflects and reinforces existing gendered social relations. Prevention education can potentially raise awareness of these complexities, including shifting de-gendered conceptualisations of GBV.

GBV and the gender norms that underpin it may be experienced differentially based on one’s location on the various matrices of privilege or disadvantage. There is a lack of research that deploys an intersectional lens to understand GBV and anti-violence activism. Any attempt to challenge GBV through institutional responses needs to address the links between gender and other axes of inequality such as class, disability and non-binary gender presentations.

Our analysis of students’ experiences of the NTE also offers valuable insights around defining intervention/resistance and on the kinds of agentic practices that are possible in oppressive contexts. What constitutes an intervention needs further interrogation, as does the possibility of defining and measuring ‘success.’ In spaces such as the NTE, acts of sexual violence are often ephemeral and embedded within dominant cultural norms, making collective resistance by students seeking to inhabit these spaces particularly challenging. Understanding strategies used to evade or challenge GBV is therefore instructive in analysing the nature of resistance at this individual, micro-level, as well as in illuminating how available modes of resistance might serve to re-inscribe prevailing gender norms. Finally, our analysis highlights both the constraints on, and

possibilities for, more collective and potentially transformative (student) resistance within the gendered spaces of the NTE.

Endnotes:

1. We define sexual violence as a continuum of behaviours and expressions from rape and sexual assault to more everyday violations such as street sexual harassment, name-calling and technology-based non-consensual circulation of sexual images.
2. BI programmes seek to foster community responses to GBV (Banyard et al 2007) by training individuals to identify behaviours and expressions of GBV, and to intervene to challenge them. The BI programme at this university was implemented by academics (supported by the students' union), in collaboration with three charities working to address violence against women, and involved: social marketing through the dissemination of student-designed posters; peer education; and a theatre project.
3. The vignette that generated the data is: "You are standing in a queue waiting to go into a club in the High Street. A group of four male students that you recognise from your course are laughing and making comments to two female students dressed in short skirts, who are standing in front of them. One of the men slaps the bum of the girl directly in front of him and his friend then tries to put his arms around both of the women. Both women try and shrug the man off and one tells him to 'get lost' and pushes him away. You then hear one of the men calling her a 'frigid bitch' and saying that she should be grateful for the attention. The men continue to try and pinch/tickle the women, who eventually leave the queue and walk away."

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